The Washington Post

Health & Science

In small towns across the nation, the death of a coal plant leaves an unmistakable void

By Brady Dennis and
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March 28

ADAMS COUNTY, Ohio — The barges floating down the Ohio River no longer deliver coal to the two power plants that have stood here for decades, twin sentinels looming over this rural county east of Cincinnati.

The boilers have sat idle since May, when both the J.M. Stuart and Killen power plants closed on the same day. They once provided about 700 jobs but now are among the latest casualties of a declining industry that has seen nearly half of the nation's coal-fired plants close over the past decade.

The vanishing of coal plants from the American landscape began years ago, but it has persisted under President Trump, who came into office promising to revitalize the coal industry. He has rolled back environmental regulations meant to curb pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, installed a former coal lobbyist as head of the Environmental Protection Agency and tweeted in favor of keeping certain units operating. And yet, utilities have continued to shut down plants.

The main reason? Coal can't compete against cheaper, cleaner alternatives, such as natural gas and solar and wind energy.

More coal plant capacity disappeared during Trump's first two years in office than during President Barack Obama's entire first term, and the closures are set to continue in 2019 and beyond.

The slow retreat of coal plants has brought what many scientists, environmental advocates and policymakers say is much-needed change. Burning coal causes air pollution that can damage the health of nearby residents. It releases large amounts of carbon dioxide, which fuels climate change. And the leftover waste lingers in landfills and storage pits that can threaten water supplies.

But in places like Adams County, with a population of about 28,000 and already one of the poorest corners of Ohio, the death of a coal plant can leave an unmistakable void. When the Stuart and Killen stations closed last year, with them went the area's highest-paying jobs, its largest employers, its biggest taxpayers and, in many ways, its lifeblood.

"It's devastating, really, to be honest," said Adams County Sheriff Kimmy Rogers, who said he has fewer deputies than when he started in 2010 and, during some shifts, has only two to cover 583 square miles. "The only thing we had going for us, really, were the power plants."

Stuart and Killen were among the 19 coal-fired plants to shut down across the country during 2018 — one of the largest waves of U.S. coal plant retirements in a single year. Stuart, which once had a staggering capacity of 2,318 megawatts, remains the largest U.S. coal plant to close its doors.

But long before that happened, local officials and union workers in Adams County scrambled to salvage them. Ty Pell, president of the county commissioners, traveled to the state capital, as well as to Washington, to seek help from Ohio's elected officials and from Vice President Pence.

"We did all we could," recalled Pell, whose father worked at the Stuart plant. "We knew we were behind the eight ball."

Employees went on television, imploring Trump to intervene. Union officials urged the owners to seek new buyers. Ultimately, the company that owned the generating stations, AES, did not budge in its decision, saying it closed the coal-fired plants "in response to declining market conditions."

"That money is never coming back," Pell said of the millions of dollars in salaries and tax revenue that has vanished like wisps of steam from the coal stacks. The county commission has slashed the budget two years in a row in anticipation of lean times ahead.

In the months since last year's closures, workers fled for jobs in Wyoming, Florida, Washington, Idaho, Wisconsin, Colorado, Oregon and elsewhere. The local school system has seen enrollment plunge and has cut positions to make up for budget shortfalls.

"Talented people are moving," Michael Pell, Ty's brother and the head of a local bank, said of the exodus. "It's hard to really get your arms around how much of an impact that is."

Of the plant workers who stayed in Adams County, some have used federal assistance to enroll in community college to train for other trades, such as welding or electrical work. Others have competed with their former co-workers for a handful of industrial jobs in the area, some of which offer lower pay and require longer commutes.

Some workers, like 58-year-old Linda Kirschner, felt too old to begin a new career but are too young to tap into their retirement savings.

"It's been the worst year," said Kirschner, who worked at the Killen Station for 37 years. "That plant had been my whole life."

She made about $75,000 a year at the plant, she said, and sometimes much more with overtime. Now, she gets by on her $25,000-a-year pension and does part-time work at an Edward Jones investment firm for $12.50 an hour.

"A lot of the younger people kept holding on to hope, but I knew in my heart it was going to close," Kirschner said. "I think it was already set in stone."

As a candidate, Trump vowed to revive the coal industry — a stance that helped garner him 76 percent of the vote in Adams County in 2016. His administration has worked to lessen regulations on both coal mining operations and coal-fired power plants, and it even proposed that federal regulators effectively subsidize coal plants. (The regulators have declined.)

But for all of the president's efforts, the numbers are not in his favor.

In 2018, U.S. consumption of coal hit a four-decade low, falling to a 28 percent share of the nation's electricity generation, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. The EIA expects an 8 percent drop in U.S. coal consumption this year, even as global coal demand has continued to rise in places such as India.

Last year's coal plant retirements were the second-largest ever in terms of capacity. Companies have announced that they intend to close at least 10 more by the end of this year and many more by 2030.

In many ways, the shift represents a simple case of market forces.

Natural gas for years has offered a cleaner, cheaper alternative to coal. Renewable energy from wind and solar is more affordable than ever. The Obama administration put in place environmental policies aimed at curbing pollution and combating climate change that made coal burning more costly.

The changing structure of electricity markets also has hastened the collapse of coal power. Increasing competition in regional electricity grids has left many old coal plants unable to go head to head against solar, wind and natural gas — all of which have extremely low operating costs.

One of the people deciding the fate of U.S. coal plants is Nick Akins, chief executive of Ohio-based American Electric Power, one of the nation's largest utilities and one that traditionally has relied heavily on coal.

"It's natural gas, renewables and a bet that technology will continue to develop greater efficiencies on the grid," Akins said of coal's declining share.

AEP, which owned a portion of the Stuart plant, has shaved coal usage from about 70 percent of its power generation in 2005 to 47 percent today. And it plans to idle two units at a Conesville, Ohio, plant in May and another unit there in 2020.

In weighing whether to shut down an old plant, Akins said, the company must decide whether to make major investments to scale back toxic emissions of nitrogen oxides or sulfur dioxide, which can cause heart and lung disease.

"There is no point in spending on a plant that will be retired," Akins said.

He said AEP also has been responding to pressure from climate-conscious companies such as Google and Amazon. (Amazon CEO Jeffrey P. Bezos owns The Washington Post.)

"We have a lot of data facilities in our territory, and their expectation is that they be served by 100 percent renewable energy," Akins said. Shareholders and fund managers worried about climate-change risks are urging changes, too, he said.

AEP must also meet the state-level renewable portfolio standards that lawmakers in 29 states have enacted in recent years. Ohio's standard requires that 12.5 percent of the electricity sold by the state's utilities be generated by renewable energy by 2027. To hit that target, AEP recently purchased all or part of seven existing wind farms and battery installations for $1.06 billion.

The Sierra Club, through its Beyond Coal campaign, backed financially by former New York mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, has been pressing to close all U.S. coal plants through negotiation and litigation. It says that investing more money in propping up coal generation prolongs air and water pollution and causes premature deaths, especially near the plants. The Sierra Club said that forcing ratepayers to pay for coal plant investments amounts to bailouts — a key point used to close the Stuart and Killen plants.

AES, through its Dayton Power & Light subsidiary, agreed when it shut down the southern Ohio plants to spend $2 million on workforce development and job training in the area. Initially, according to the Sierra Club, the plants' owners also agreed to develop at least 300 megawatts of solar and wind projects in Ohio, but that plan did not materialize.

Pat Wood III, former chairman of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and former chairman of the power company Dynegy, said that as electricity markets have become more competitive, it's even harder to cover the investment costs of coal.

"The hardest thing about this was looking these guys in the eye," Wood said, recalling meetings with workers when their plants still hung in the balance. "As chairman of the board, I had to be honest and say that the future didn't look great."

The immediate future for Adams County doesn't look so bright, either.

County leaders trimmed the budget by 15 percent in 2017 and another 5 percent in 2018. Ty Pell worries about the shrinking tax base, and no one has much appetite for asking local residents to make up the shortfall.

"It's hard to tell somebody, 'Sorry you lost your job, but we're going to raise your property taxes,' " he said.

Matt Carey, the county's EMS chief, has kept most response times to roughly five or six minutes, despite a $350,000 drop in his budget that forced him to cut supply costs and limit overtime. But he worries. "We're already on a skeleton budget. What else is there to cut?" he said.

The nearby Manchester Local School District used to get three-quarters of its funding from local taxes. It now relies on the state for the bulk of its funding. Its budget has shrunk, and a district that used to spend about $12,000 a year on each student now spends about $8,000.

"Obviously, you can only cut so many staff," said schools superintendent Brian Rau, who said enrollment has dropped more than 10 percent. "There's a few more cuts I could make, but it sure wouldn't be pleasant."

Today, as skeleton crews of about a dozen people remain at each of the shuttered coal plants, the value of the properties, which include miles of riverfront land, has tumbled.

"We're talking about several hundred million dollars" in taxable value, said David Gifford, the county auditor.

For the most part, even those here who wish the Trump administration had done more to keep the two plants open don't fault the president for their closing. At least no more than they blame state officials, or Obama-era regulations, or the utility company that closed them, or environmental groups, or the unforgiving economics of the marketplace.

Trey Gallenstein, a controls mechanic at the Stuart plant for nearly a decade, searched for nine months before he recently found a job at a hydroelectric plant 30 miles away. It's twice the drive each day in his black GMC truck for 20 percent less pay.

"But better than I was expecting," said Gallenstein, who has a 2-year-old daughter. "I've worked more in the last three days than in the last nine months. It'll feel good when I get that first paycheck."

For others, seeking the next paycheck has meant leaving Adams County behind.

Cindy Stike, general manager at Moyer Winery and Restaurant, said her two children moved to Wyoming and Washington for jobs at other power plants.

"It's what they had to do for their families," Stike said. "That's what happens when a big plant shuts down in a small town."

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